



*INSS Insight* No. 503, December 30, 2013

## **Is Turkey Returning to the “Zero Problems” Policy?**

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The disclosure of political corruption of unprecedented proportions in Turkey’s history has catapulted the country into a state of major political upheaval. So far, the response of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has consisted of counterattack and statements attributing the exposé to a network of domestic and international elements interested in toppling his party’s rule. He has even attacked alleged provocations by foreign ambassadors in Turkey and threatened to expel them. In practice, however, Turkey’s foreign policy, at least with regard to some of the neighboring countries, is very different from what the rhetoric would seem to indicate. In fact, in recent weeks one can discern efforts to jumpstart Turkey’s erstwhile “zero problems” policy.

The “zero problems” policy, formulated by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu (previously the Prime Minister’s chief foreign policy advisor), involved taking active steps to resolve outstanding problems between Turkey and its neighbors, as well as making efforts to encourage stability in adjacent regions. While the policy had considerable success until the onset of the Arab Awakening, since the start of the regional upheaval Turkey has experienced several foreign policy failures – to the point that Turkey was mocked as having “zero neighbors” with whom it had no problems. Unlike the previous incarnation of the policy, no dramatic announcements have accompanied it now, but in practice one can point to the reemergence of patterns that characterized Turkey’s foreign policy before 2011. It is worth noting that given that Davutoglu is not implicated in any of the scandals rocking Turkey, he may be one Turkish politician to emerge strengthened from the corruption incidents.

Of particular interest is the newfound closeness between Ankara and Baghdad, following the tension that characterized their relations in recent years. Over the last few months, there have been several state visits by high ranking politicians, including the visit by Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari to Turkey, and Davutoglu’s reciprocal visit to Iraq. It was also reported that mutual visits at the prime ministerial level can be expected in the near future. Moreover, Turkey, a state interested in becoming an energy hub and whose own energy consumption is rising, is hard at work to promote the transport of oil and natural gas from northern Iraq through Turkey by signing direct agreements to that effect

with the Kurdish regional government. At present, it seems that understandings between Ankara and Baghdad, which would ensure the division of oil revenue according to the Iraqi constitution, have been reached. This includes the construction of a measurement station on the border between the two states so that Iraqi authorities can calculate the amount of oil exported from northern Iraq.

The warming of relations between Turkey and Iran began even earlier, and the election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran’s president was one of the reasons, or perhaps pretexts, for the thaw. Unlike Israel and Saudi Arabia, for example, Turkey welcomed the interim agreement signed by the E3+3 and Iran on Iran’s nuclear program. Furthermore, despite the fundamental difference between the two nations on the future of Assad’s government, the joint statement by the Turkish Foreign Minister and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif at a press conference in Tehran in late November, calling for a ceasefire in the civil war in Syria before the Geneva 2 conference, was noteworthy. Some of the corruption now exposed in Turkey involves trade relations between Turkey and Iran and the extensive use of Turkey by Iran to circumvent the economic sanctions, especially with regard to banking transactions. Although as a result of these revelations international pressure on Turkey to reduce the scope of its economic ties with Iran will likely increase, it is also clear that there is much economic interdependence between the two nations.

In the original incarnation of the “zero problems” policy, some attempts were made to warm relations with Armenia, and protocols that were supposed to lead to opening the common border were signed in October 2009. But the protocols were never ratified by the parliaments and the process ended in failure, both because of internal opposition in Armenia and because Azerbaijan, Turkey’s ally, was furious that it had not been privy to the process despite its ongoing conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent regions. In November 2013, Foreign Minister Davutoglu asked Switzerland to try to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan (given that the 2009 thaw between Turkey and Armenia occurred with Swiss help). In addition, the participation of Davutoglu at the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation meeting in Yerevan on December 12, 2013 was the first time so highly ranked a Turkish official had visited Armenia since the failed 2009 process. During his visit, Davutoglu departed from the usual Turkish script on the 1915 events and said that the deportations of the Armenian population were “inhumane.” It also seems that there is progress on Cyprus, and in his visit to Greece in mid-December, Foreign Minister Davutoglu referred to the momentum in talks between the sides on solving this ongoing conflict.

Given that in the past relations between Turkey and Israel had been free of bilateral problems, there was no need for the “zero problems” policy to relate to Israel, other than some attempts to mediate between Israel and Syria and diplomatic assistance on the Palestinian issue. After the *Mavi Marmara* incident, this was no longer the case: the incident was the first direct confrontation between the two nations. Recently, however,

there have been several signs indicating that the return of ambassadors to Tel Aviv and Ankara may soon occur. In early December, for the first time since the incident, an Israeli minister – Environmental Protection Minister Amir Peretz – participated in an international conference in Turkey and met with his Turkish counterpart. In addition, it was reported that the two countries have signed a document that would pave the way for restoring flights by Israeli airlines to Turkish destinations in the summer of 2014. More important, it was reported that Israeli and Turkish representatives met in mid-December for another round of discussions about compensation over the *Mavi Marmara* incident and withdrawing the lawsuits against IDF soldiers, and that the gap between the sides seems to have narrowed considerably. Nonetheless, insofar as some Turkish media outlets known to have strong ties to the ruling Justice and Development Party accused Israel, the Jewish lobby, and the United States for the revelation of the country’s political corruption, it may well be that the timing is again not optimal for normalizing the bilateral relations.

At present, there are signs that the Turkish “zero problems” policy is making a comeback. Unlike the pre-Arab Awakening period, there are no dramatic declarations of the kind that used to attend the policy, and therefore the most one can say is that, de facto, there are indications of its return. While in the past Turkey faced some difficult issues with its neighbors, given the growing instability in the Middle East, Turkey is operating in an even more complex strategic environment. In this sense, the opening conditions for the attempt to re-launch the “zero problems” policy are tougher than in the past. It is almost certain that the essential disagreements Turkey has with both Syria and Egypt (given Turkey’s resolute calls for toppling Bashar al-Assad’s regime and the criticism Turkey has expressed about the military coup in Egypt) will not be resolved quickly. Turkey’s current domestic political turmoil will also make it difficult to advance some its new initiatives. The political corruption that has recently come to light is the most potent of all threats to the Justice and Development Party’s continued control of the government; it is already obvious that Erdogan’s stature both within and outside his party has been damaged. The politician who remains very popular and untainted by scandal is President Abdullah Gul. Gul’s positions are perceived as moderate compared to Erdogan’s and therefore, should there be changes at the top of the political pyramid, he may be expected to help smooth the way when it comes to Turkey’s foreign affairs.

